

**FROM THE BROOM FIELD TO THE RED BARN (AND GALLOWS HILL):  
INTIMATE FEMICIDE IN THE ENGLISH BROADSIDE BALLADS,  
ca 1650 – ca 1850**

**Thomas Pettitt**

**Cultural Sciences Institute (*IKV*)  
University of Southern Denmark**

Much of my research on English broadside balladry has focused on a genre which is unusually well-defined and long-lived, the 'Murdered Sweetheart Ballad', in which a young woman, on promise of marriage, accepts the sexual advances of a local young man, but when she becomes pregnant and implores him to fulfil his promise, he lures her away to a lonely spot, and murders her. All the fifty or so known ballads in this genre first appeared on broadsides, from the first half of the seventeenth century to the second half of the nineteenth (and several persisted later in singing tradition). The retribution visited upon the murderous lover is definitive to the genre, but can be achieved in two ways. In a small minority of cases, the crime is avenged by supernatural means, but this presentation will accord major attention to the dominant sub-genre in which the murderer is brought to book by the regular judicial system (arrest, trial, execution). For research purposes it has the advantage of claiming to report real crime, in some cases documented by external evidence (official; journalistic), enabling the study of the composition process by juxtaposing the ballad's narrative treatment of the received information. Furthermore the 'authentic' aspect of the cases invites exploration of their socio-cultural contexts, under the heading of what modern social historians and sociologists would term 'intimate femicide', here exacerbated by the 'foeticide' of the unborn child and the courtship context. These topics will be illustrated by reference to one of the best documented of the earliest murdered sweetheart ballads, "The Downfall of William Grismond" (the case dating from 1629) and to one of the in all nine broadside ballads prompted by the notorious murder of Maria Marten by William Corder (in 1827) – the selection also facilitating illustration of generic stability and evolution over time. (See <https://www.academia.edu/36450285/> for my publications on the genre.)